

## TO BE OR TO BECOME?

## Cultural Factors in Social Adjustment of Indians

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We are grateful to Hildegard Thompson, Chief, Branch of Education, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Washington, D. C., for permission to reprint the following excerpts from an address by Dr. Ben Reifel, Area Director, Aberdeen Area, to the Northern Montana Work Conference on Indian Education, which was published in Indian Education, April 15, 1957. Dr. Reifel had a German father and a Sioux mother.

My concern is with the Indian-American community, family, and individual where outlook and attitudes are such that the persons who come from them are not challenged by the wonderful opportunities that are to be found everywhere in America. The social situation of the Indian Americans has little if anything in common with that of other racial or ethnic minorities from the standpoint of social adjustments. Now I would like to suggest why I think the old ways of Indian life keep them in the state of mind where none are moved to see material opportunities or, where they do see them, they feel no desire to take advantage of them. It is helpful to see this side of the picture in order that we will have the patience and understanding necessary to aid in bringing about a healthy adjustment from their way of life to the one in which we find our material being.

Here are what I believe to be the four most important differences in the way that the attitudes and outlooks of the individuals are affected:

1. In the American way of life, those of us who are carried along in its social stream are future-oriented. In contrast, those whose lives are governed by the values of the Indian life are oriented to the present. The Indians had no need to be apprehensive about the future, from a material standpoint. It is reliably estimated that not more than one million people inhabited what is now the United States and Canada at the time that Columbus discovered this part of the world. Nature's bounty did not require her modification for survival for this handful of humans. The Indian, in his societies over all those thousands of years when he was fashioning his way of life, found he could have all that he required in the way of food, clothing, and shelter by living in harmony with nature. This meant that the essence of life was found in being and not in becoming something we

are not today.

2. Time, in the sense of measuring duration by clocks and days-of-the-week calendars as we do, is not important in the Indian way of life. In our economic and other social relationships it becomes essential to schedule most of our activities in accordance with a commonly accepted system of timing if we, as personalities, are to attain a satisfying sense of achievement in the complex way of life in which we find ourselves today. In the economically simple life of the old Indian system there was never any need to co-ordinate the efforts of the group except in some general way around the natural objects, such as the sun, moon, and seasons.

3. Saving as a means to achieve economic development has not been a part of the life of the Indian in his nomadic state where he lived largely by hunting and food gathering. We have been taught to forego present use of our time and money for anticipated greater satisfactions at a later date. We are encouraged to put any extra income we have into bonds, insurance, property, and other types of savings for use in later years when our earning power might be lost.

With the Indians there was no reason to be constantly thinking of the future. To them the necessities for living were nearly as free as the air we breathe. Air is necessary for life but we seldom think of saving it up for future use except in unusual conditions such as high-altitude flying, or to aid a very sick person with extra oxygen. The things essential to life in those early times, like air to most of us today, has no economic value and therefore there was no need to act in terms of saving for this purpose.

4. Habituation to hard work, including drudgery for over a period of years, if necessary to earn a

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living, was not in the Indian system, particularly for the men. Sociologists explain that this is an inheritance of Western European origin. The forefathers of the emigrants to this country from Europe were taught to work. There developed a pride in work for work's sake.

The Indian culture did not make provisions in its social system to develop like habits of work among the men of the tribes. It fell to the lot of women to do the tedious tasks such as the tanning of skins, the care of children, the preparation of the food: the Indian women were the "hewers of wood and the carriers of water." In the Indian life of that earlier day, the able-bodied men of the tribes could not be permitted the luxury of doing these jobs that came to be regarded as "women's work."

They had an equally important role to perform. They had to keep themselves ever ready to guard their camps against the possible attack of enemy tribes and be prepared to yield up their lives if that supreme sacrifice was necessary to the accomplishment of the job. Theirs was the more rigorous task of hunting so that the people would have food, clothing, and shelter. If the men did otherwise, their people would either become slaves or perish.

TIME, SAVING, AND WORK - as individuals, as communities or even as a nation, we cannot, without disastrous consequences, disregard any one of them for very long. We who are fortunate to have jobs, if we want to keep them, must show up for work on time all the time; we must give a good account of ourselves on the job by putting out satisfactory performance; and then we must save our earnings so that we may pay our bills and have enough left over for our old age and for periods of illness when we are unable to work.

Time, saving and work - we find them popping out at us in everything that we do; in our American way of life we cannot push any one of them aside for very long at a time without running into trouble. Those of us of Indian descent, who have become habituated to the values of time, work, and saving in the American way of life are no longer culturally Indian in the sense of living by the values of old Indian life ways.

The wonder of our time is not that social adjustment of Indian Americans has been slow but that so many have found it possible to fit into the American social system in so short a time. I think we might have speeded up the acculturation process had we known in earlier times the knowledge made available to us by the social sciences in the past 40 to 50 years. Had it been realized that a large part of the adjustment processes hinged on the development of concepts of time, work and saving by the Indian people themselves, we would have been much further along by this time. These elements are not by their nature likely to create any great amount of emotional resistance if presented for consideration. To have them introduced in the culture, need not have changed their manner of dress, the system of worship, the ways of recreation, or their language.

But what was done, Indian people were asked to give up their language, their ceremonials, their way of dressing, and other aspects of their way of life that had no sensible bearing on social adjustment. Had they been helped to understand the importance for the survival of their cherished way of life by the incorporation of concepts of time, saving and work into the Indian system they might have saved much that is lost to all of us today.

It is not too late to help the Indian build anew on what yet remains. A deep inner spirituality that has come across the ages still burns in his breast, but dimly; it might again be rekindled and add its spark to the richness of our American life.

However, this is something that will not be brought about by you and me. It will be accomplished only to the degree that the unacculturated Indian Americans themselves see the conditions we see as being undesirable and want to do something about them. It is not enough that you and I see these conditions of poverty as problems; these folks must come to see them as problems that are their problems. Then and then only will they begin to search for solutions that will enable outsiders like ourselves to give effective help.